TL 2418

Süddeutsche Zeitung

Saturday/Sunday
19/20 July 1986

Ten Years after Annexation by Indonesia: EAST TIMOR STILL A BONE OF CONTENTION

Jakarta has admitted to "numerous mistakes", but is now investing some efforts in the former Portuguese colony.

By our correspondent Verena Stern

Singapore, July 18

Journalists have always required a special permit to visit the Eastern part of the island Timor. "Papa Gestapo" Laurenco, so called by the inhabitants of East Timor, and head of the Portuguese Security Police, the Direccao General de Seguraca (DGS), not only kept a sharp watch over the ragged and undernourished subjects of the Portuguese colony situated in the Indonesian archipelago, DGS-inspector Laurenco equally strictly saw to it that no reporter informed the outside world of the outrageous misery following 400 years of Portuguese reign (unless the reporter had disguised himself as a tourist , which again "Papa Gestapo" tried to prevent by issuing the minimum possible number of tourist visas).

Such discretion is today at least in so far no longer observed as it is Lisbon, of all places, Portugal's capital, where for several years running reports on life - or rather more appropriately, hunger, fighting and death - on East Timor have been prepared and sent to journalists, magazines and newspapers all over the world at regular intervals. In each case reference is made to "a letter just received from East Timor" in which "intensive guerilla activities" are reported, "costing the invasors a large number of dead and wounded", and according to which the guerilleros were able to "seize a large amount of modern weapons", "enabling the members of the resistance to continue their hold over the largest part of the territory, and to remain hidden nearby the villages and the concentration camps". The resistance of the people of East Timor - naturally - results in the "incarceration, exile, and disappearance of the best men of all ages and from different social classes". Timorese maintaining a contact with the guerilleros immediately fell "victim to torture and massacres". Finally, a state family planning program, allowing each family a maximum of three children, was responsible "for the disappearance of the Timorese as an ethnic identity".

1975 - a year of fighting

Contents and wording of the extracts from the letters are identical from one year to the other - only the date of their posting in Dili, the capital of East Timor, is brought up to date each time. And the name of the writer of the letters naturally - for security reasons, of course - is also kept secret.

The identity of the sender and the authenticity of the letters' contents, though, is guaranteed by Monsignore Martinho da Costa Lopes, bishop of East Timor until 1983, and - an unusual occurence in the Catholic Church - recalled from his post by the Vatican because he had shown too much sympathy for the goals of the marxist Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of East Timor (Fretilin). This movement had been founded in 1974 by the former Catholic priest Francisco Xavier Dos Reis Amaral after the Portuguese had indicated that they wanted to get rid of their overseas provinces. The party was put through a training after the model of the Mocambique Frelimo by the Portuguese-Timorese Jose Ramos Horta, the Fretilin secretary general.

Horta, then 26 and bearded, had earlier been reporting for a local newspaper on the Mocambique fight for liberation, and refused to accept that the other two parties of East Timor, the Apodeti and the Timor Democratic Union (UDT) were propagating a union with Indonesia, which, after independence, had taken over the West half of the island, which had been divided in 1859. The Fretilin then unilaterally declared East Timor independent and in 1975 started a savage civil war which moved Indonesia to intervene after tens of thousands had fled to the West of the island. The Indonesians appointed a provisional coalition government consisting of members of the Apodeti and the UDT, which in 1975 moved for a union with Indonesia. This was put in effect on July 17, 1976.

Jose Ramos Horta meanwhile - after spending several years of exile in Lisbon - is in residence as self-appointed "UN ambassador of the Fretilin". He is the main source of reports on the reputedly successful resistance activities of his Fretilin liberation movement, allegedly enjoying more and more support among the people, and on reputed massacres and torturings carried out by the Indonesian army. Foreign diplomats, members of parliament from various countries, and journalists who have been allowed to visit East Timor since 1976 - admittedly only at large intervals - have been able to ascertain the opposite. Hortas junior brother, Arsenio, at one time himself an active partisan of the Fretilin, refers to the approximately 500 guerilleros of the Fretilin still hiding in the mountains of the jungle as "a gang of adventurers and torturers who have absolutely no interest in the welfare of the Timorese, and who terrorise the people by raids carried out at irregular intervals".

Doubtless the Indonesians acted with considerable ruthlessness towards the people of East Timor when they invaded the country in 1975 with tanks, heavy artillery, helicopters, and B 26 bombers with the aim of breaking the Fretilin resistance within the shortest possible time. Nearly half of the 650,000 Timorese fled from the invasors into the mountains. Most of them did not return until 1979, half starved and sick, to find themselves placed in internment camps.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar has admitted several times that his government has committed "numerous mistakes" in the process of integration. Since East Timor's annexation (now forming the 27th province), the Indonesians however have invested much more money into the development of the backward and formerly ruthlessly exploited (by the Portuguese) province than in any other of their State's regions. Nevertheless, in spite of prior pledges to the contrary, no foreign correspondents were allowed to attend the celebration * of the decentennial of East Timor's incorporation.

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